

Lean on Me

April 25, 2012

Together our Strength is Great Enough to Make our Vision Live in the World

We welcome all to grow bold faith and take bold action.

Yesterday, I attended a musical program at my son's school. The sixth grade boys sang the following song that, for me, says so much about our congregation. Not only can we extend helping hands to those within the circle, but we can also reach out and create an ever-expanding web of care. This requires looking beyond our immediate responses, needs for safety and protection, and the beliefs that our historical experience have solidified, yet may not apply anymore.

We are not just stewards of a church building, or a congregation that exists at this moment. The church belongs to the mission and message of Unitarian Universalism. We are stewards more of tomorrow than today, and are obliged to think of those who have not yet arrived and yet need the love and enlivening of our message.

Together, we can look beyond simple stories of the way things are toward what can be. If not us, then who? If not now, when? Waiting for things to change is a less than strategic way to reach goals and live out vision. Any work takes time and care, and we have done a great job so far. We can keep growing as a community, and I believe we will.

This congregation has within itself the answers to its questions. We need only engage each other in conversation and real solution-making.

Warmest thanks for providing the support we all need, both in our individual times of need and our communal ones. We are able to take the risks to find the place where magic happens, because we are free to lean on each other.

Enjoy the music when you click on the link below. I did, and thought of you.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xe0UrFehQIM>

On behalf of the Parish Committee, Melinda Collins

Finding Our Voice

March 28, 2012

One of the highest pursuits as a human being is finding our voice and helping others to do the same.

Author Marianne Williamson aptly portrays our ambivalence regarding the gifts and uniqueness of who we are:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God, of the universe. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that people won't feel insecure around you (or that inevitable mistakes will be avoided or go unnoticed). We are all meant to shine, as children do. This light of greatness is in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. We liberate others as we liberate ourselves.

Let your light shine. May our light shine, and may we help others to find their light in this season of new life and life anew.

On behalf of the Parish Committee, Melinda Collins, chair

The Transgender of Wisdom of Welcome

March 7, 2012

It's been some time since we were certified as a Welcoming Congregation by the UUA (Unitarian Universalist Association). As some of us may know, this certification was granted after a process through which our church community learned how to welcome and better support the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender and queer) communities.

Last Spring, a new Welcoming Congregation logo was designed and a new sign bearing this logo is soon to come. These are important signals to the community and reminders to ourselves of our dedication to inclusivity. It's wonderful that we value the worth and dignity of all people who come through our doors, but is that enough?

Even though we may be comfortable with varied expressions of identity and sexuality, does our internal comfort and acceptance make those new to us comfortable among us and in our space? My question arises from a recent experience. Last weekend I was asked to show an acquaintance to the bathroom at another UU church. There were two clearly marked communal bathrooms - Gentlemen and Ladies. We both stopped and looked at each other, and she quickly suggested we look for a non-gendered bathroom.

After a quick scout, we found a Ladies/Universal Access bathroom, but from her demeanor, I'm sure she was perturbed and I, admittedly, was disappointed and embarrassed that she had to ask and hunt, with the very real possibility of finding no appropriate facility. How unwelcome she must have felt - she must feel.

And so I am thankful to the panelists of our Transgender Identity Common Hearth. Their experiences and wisdom have begun to help me see the exclusion built into daily life. Church is no exception. As anyone who has ever walked into a new church knows, these are institutions full of linguistic and behavioral norms, codified over long periods of time, usually invisible to those in the system, and rarely well understood.

Learning to see our beloved surroundings through the questioning and anxious eyes of the newcomer could help us see and meet the needs of all those we wish to serve, especially those who have historically felt the exclusivity and narrow confines of welcome. No one need feel like a stranger among us. I believe we can welcome all as friend, familiar and new alike.

While the quality of welcome at home is critical, we cannot substitute it for the welcome we extend when we go to those places where historically marginalized people already feel at home. This was the answer I received when I asked the panel how we might get the word out about our church. "Welcome isn't enough; invitation is needed." In other words, welcome has a static quality and extends to those whom we either invite or come through our doors. Going out and extending the dynamic hand of invitation and fellowship may be the new welcome we need to look toward.

I invite and welcome us all to visit the UUA website on LGBTQ issues and welcoming. What we learn can help open our hearts and minds to the full variety of living and experience available to us as human beings: www.uua.org/lgbt. More information can be found at www.web.mit.edu/trans

May we find ways to live the welcome we feel in our hearts.
Melinda Collins, on behalf of the Parish Committee

Truth is Worth Wanting

February 15, 2012

Lily and I ran across a TED talk we enjoyed a lot this week (link below). For me, the most compelling parts of what Dr. Meyer says center around those things we are called to do in the face of a society weakened by the tacit embrace of deception.

Her argument goes a bit like this.

1. Lying is an act of complicity; you have to agree to be lied to (in many cases).

The role the mortgage system, which includes private citizens, government, media and industry, played in the most recent financial crisis is a glaring, meaty example.

2. Rather than condemning and shaming untruth, we should work to surface truth in our lives and interactions. Have the difficult conversations. That's what leaders are called to do, she says. And I say, who isn't a leader in her or his own life?

I would argue that our society's focus on "playing nice" as a way of getting along feeds our comfort with lying. When in reality, ignoring what's really going on, real feelings, real ways of being and thinking, leads these things to break out in unforeseen places and ways that can at best hold us back from our potential, and at worst can destroy us.

Moreover, there is no understanding where differences are covered, ignored, or minimized. History is filled with examples of how we can invalidate each other's identities and even existence, all in the name of comfort, or the well-intended, yet misguided desire to "get along."

3. So Dr. Meyer finishes by exhorting us to be more explicit about our moral (not moralistic) codes when interacting with other people, as a way toward more truth-filled living.

What would this look like? To have the difficult conversation.

To turn around on the school bus and say, "it's not right to joke about being gay. It doesn't matter who you love, it's that you do love that matters."

To tell those you are closest to you how you really feel, and let them help you examine the situation together, or just hold you.

To change the things that really aren't working.

To celebrate openly the wonderful things that are working.

Let's have the difficult conversations, and let's begin with ourselves.

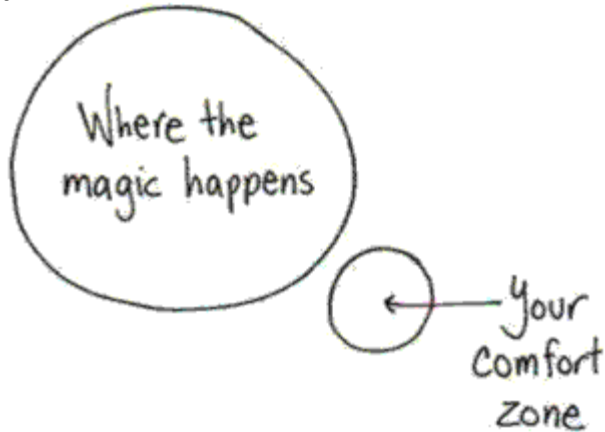
Yours in fellowship on behalf of the Parish Committee, Melinda Collins

Please note: There is testimony of two disturbing crimes, so you may want to be sensitive about whom you view this with. http://www.ted.com/talks/pamela_meyer_how_to_spot_a_liar.html

Where the Magic Happens

January 31, 2012

I love this graphic. It applies equally to the concrete and the abstract, whether it be adopting new ways to be healthy, like exercising or eating well; being as generous as you'd like to be in the face of uncertainty; or allowing for the possibility of a radical change in your thinking, or your life - or your church life.



Wishing us all the blessings of magic and the courage to get inside the circle.

Melinda Collins, On behalf of the Parish Committee

Thoughts from a Parish Committee Member

Brian Kelley

January 23, 2012

How First Parish made a big difference in my life. As many of you already know, my father/ best friend passed away suddenly on New Year's weekend. My father was what I considered a young age 69. I was away at Gunstock Mountain in NH with some family and friends when I got word that my sister and her husband found him dead in his Milton Home. I have been most fortunate in my life, and have never experienced the kind of pain I felt sweep over me. I come from a large family, with two older brothers and five younger sisters. Our mom's mind and body have been ravaged by the inescapable grip of Alzheimer's disease. So being a good Unitarian, I have been prompting my siblings to start planning for her death. You can imagine how shocked I was to hear that dad had left us first.

Because, I lived just a block from my dad or Papa as we called him, I found myself at the epicenter of this sad event. When I arrived home from the long and tearful journey from NH, I found my home filled with 30 plus family members all very much in shock as me. I did not sleep that night, but my mind and thoughts kept bouncing around and First Parish was always present.

I was trying to plan my father's send off in a way that I was comfortable with. My father, a Catholic, which I would describe as non-practicing, never did reject his faith, and so I was faced with the reality that there would probably be a Catholic funeral Mass, which I was really starting to dread.

I spoke to Parisa and she told me that Father Casey from St. Agatha's was very nice and they even share the same birth day and month. I even asked if we could have a Catholic service at First Parish if I could get a priest to agree. She was open to anything and willing to do whatever I asked of her.

I also wanted to have the reception after the funeral at First Parish. My dad struggled throughout his life with the demons that alcohol sometimes inflicts on certain people. He was a kind, caring and sharing man, but also sad and depressed who watched his bride slip away with her memories of him and us too. I really did not want alcohol at his final send off. My siblings were hard at work with their vision of how the celebration of his life should be and that included halls with bar service in the mix. I was also concerned about the size of the Parish Hall at First Parish, my family is large and my dad had a sizable regiment of close friends. I talked to Bill Mac Macmillan about the hall, and he set me at ease that it would work out. My cousin is married to Mike Mignozza from the Fruit Center and he offered to prepare all the food, suggesting only finger foods so that we would not need tables, only chairs at the reception. Because the fruit center was so generous in their pricing and the rental of the hall so inexpensive, my family could not say no. (This made me very happy).

Now all we needed was the body! You see, because papa was found dead in his home alone the Medical Examiner's office was contacted and he was required to have an autopsy. He was found on Sunday night New Years Day, Monday was a holiday. So with the help of the funeral director we planned for a Thursday wake and Friday Funeral. This would give the State of MA plenty of time to do their investigation.

Tuesday came and went and no body, Wednesday arrives and the funeral director, receives word around 3pm that the autopsy has been complete, but the paperwork is not finished yet? "Call back after 4:30pm." She is led to believe everything will be fine, just a little slower because of the holiday. I receive a call around 5 or 6pm, and the funeral director is in shock, she told me we could not get my father's body tonight because no one had identified the body and all plans will have to be changed. She gave me the name of the contact person in the ME's office and told me to call them, she said the person was getting ready to go home and would not wait for me to come in and do it tonight. So I called and being as nice as I could possibly be, I asked if she would wait for me if I got a police escort in to her office (I did not know how I would do this, I was just grasping at straws.) She said what do you mean? I proceeded to tell her I was friends with the Milton Chief of Police (ok at least I know who he is) she was cordial and said that would not be necessary and that she would wait for me to drive in. I asked what I would need to resolve the release of Papa's body and she told me to bring his ID and mine and I would have to identify the

body. Yes! We were going to get it done. I called the overjoyed funeral director and she immediately updated the web site to let people know we were still on for tomorrow. I completed all the tasks the nurse in the ME's office requested of me and then came the straw that almost broke my back! She asked me about my mom. I told her that my mom was in a nursing home with dementia. She then looked me in the eye and said that I would need a letter from her physician on letter head stating that she is unable to sign for the body, before dad could be released. My heart sunk, but then First Parish came to mind. Dr. Mark Ostrem and his medical group was who I went to when looking for a doctor for my mom. I had his cell number with me and called, mind you it is around 6:30 Wed night and the wake is the next afternoon. He answered! I told him of my dilemma and I gave him the fax number to the ME's office. Ten minutes later I was on the road going to the Ostrem's house to thank him and dad was on the way to the funeral home.

At 10:00pm, Wed night, my sister calls in tears, the tenor she was trying to get to sing at the funeral Mass scheduled for Friday morning at St. Gregory's could not make it. Mind you, it is late, but I was running out of time and options. I picked up, the phone and called Miguel Rodriguez, who is a member of the First Parish Meetinghouse Choir. It was as if he were waiting for the call. Yes, no problem, don't worry about a thing!! I can still hear his beautiful voice singing the Ave Maria as we exited the church after the service!

Back on the home front, food, baskets of fruit, cookies and cards were making their way into my home and heart, many from members and friends of First Parish. Parisa and many of you, including Walt Hagenbuch (over 80 years old) waited in the cold for close to two hours to give your condolences to my siblings and me. I saw members from my small group ministry at the funeral, I know they knew my dad through things I have shared and my grief was soothed by their presence and words.

So, after all that, what am I trying to say?

One, thank you! Two, First Parish and all of you mean the world to me!

Brian Kelley

The Practice of Abundance - Carving out Sanctuary

January 17, 2012

Two days ago I read that websites such as Wikipedia and the like will be going dark for 24 hours in protest of proposed federal anti-piracy laws. Later in the day I turned on the radio to hear an author talking about "carving out sanctuary" in the age of inch-deep hyper-connectivity.

This lead me to wonder how an intentional practice around carving out sanctuary from the digital and daily hubbub of our existence might lead us to experience the abundance of our lives. So I propose a challenge: five minutes four times this week. Just be. Just be in silence. And see what comes.

If you're feeling really ambitious, recruit the whole family, and set aside 15 minutes to reflect on your "just being" together at the end of the week.

My guess is that there is a whole lot inside each of us that we just don't get to tap into because we are so busy taking care of the needs that surface in the moment, or perhaps filling our precious time with a little more digital content than we'd really like.

Melinda Collins, On behalf of the Parish Committee

Discovery of Abundance

January 4, 2012

Several years ago I stumbled upon a paper calling for a redefinition of Prosperity by economist Tim Jackson. Had I believed in heaven, I would have thought I'd arrived! He asserts, that the traditional numbers oriented definition of prosperity was a brilliant innovation and remains a useful, though incomplete tool of our fitness and wellbeing.

This morning I bumped into another great economics article (Please, stay with me; I know it sounds like a snoozer!) on the subject of prosperity, abundance and the reality of what it takes to be a successful society. Money is a tool, the coin of all our endeavors, dreams and values. Commercialism and a largely mechanistic view of life transform money into a fetish that sometimes commands more of our attention than it deserves. Yes, we all need to eat and pay bills; vacations and possessions do enrich our lives. But money is a human creation, and so carries with it aspects of both soul and shadow that give substance to and enliven us. So what about delving into the realms that are enriched and impoverished by money? What are these about? What do they mean to us and those around us? What do they produce?

Below is a link to an excerpt adapted from Umair Haque's [Bettersness](#) While he asserts that many of our measures of prosperity and growth are at an inflection point on a societal level, each one of his touchpoints serves as a reminder of the places in our lives that hold and display our personal Abundance and the promise of abundance should we find ourselves willing and able to look for it. [Click here for article.](#)

On behalf of your Parish Committee, I wish you a new year full of the discovery of the Abundance present in each of your lives, and the capacity and energy to build and create that which you most want to see in the world and in yourself. - *Melinda Collins, Parish Committee Chair*

The gifts we give each other may be the gift we give ourselves

Our Personal "Occupy Movement"

December 14, 2011

The inner life is subversive! And therefore, often demonized as selfish by society. Parker Palmer wisely points out that when we develop an awareness of our inner life, we became aware of the disparity between our integrity and the way the institutions around us operate. And we may become aware that we are part of the problem—that we live a divided life, that the actions our institutions demand of us conflict with our inner values. Parker Palmer holds out hope by pointing out that "institutions are projections of our own inner lives. They appear to have superhuman powers, but we can call them back to some semblance of humanity by reinventing them, because we invented them in the first place."

The Quaker teacher Douglas Steere was fond of saying that the ancient human question "Who am I?" leads inevitably to the equally important question "Whose am I?"—for there is no selfhood outside relationship. We must ask the question of selfhood and answer it as honestly as we can, no matter where it takes us. Only as we do so can we discover the community of our lives. Our deepest calling is to grow into our own authentic selfhood, whether or not it conforms to some image of who we ought to be. As we do so, we will not only find the joy that every human being seeks—we will also find our path of authentic service in the world.

Last Sunday we were fortunate enough to have Don Southworth in our pulpit. He is the Executive Director of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. One of the gifts he asked us to give each other is the gift of Love. As the season of Advent draws to a close, maybe we can ask ourselves how our Self feels compelled to live our love for self and others more outwardly, and perhaps to change our institutions?

We wish each of you, of us, a blessed and meaning-filled season.

Melinda Collins, on behalf of the Parish Committee

Article was adapted from interview with Parker Palmer from yes! Magazine

Awaken!

Have the Life you want by being present to the Life you have

November 30, 2011

Although the Season of Advent is upon us, you could say that we are in a perpetual time of advent, at least for this year. As with advent, we've decided to add intention to the learning and discerning we're doing together this year, in hope and anticipation of a fuller flowering of our values and faith in the world. Awareness of our lives, who we are, the very miracle of what we already have, especially those things that seem hidden or ignored, is the key to much of our fulfillment. The holidays can be a time of tension and even conflict for many of us, highlighting some very real needs that are going unmet in our lives, needs of safety, companionship, connection, understanding, meaning, or financial resources. Being open with ourselves about what we do have can help us meet our other needs by creating a force in our

lives that attracts opportunity and opens our eyes to things that have been there waiting for us. It also creates a positive space that reveals hidden richness to help counterbalance the real and perceived deficiencies in our lives. The Dalai Lama tells us that we have everything we need inside of us, for we are part of the Oneness. We just need to find it. We may see ourselves here and find a new way to wholeness in what we learn together.

Melinda Collins on behalf of the Parish Committee

Learning and Discerning at First Parish

November 16, 2011

Developing a congregation-wide learning goal last year was exciting and inspiring for many of us. Just to refresh our memories, here's our learning goal, the path of learning and action we've decided we feel compelled to travel together:

"Our primary learning goal is to determine how we can capitalize on what we have learned about the identity of our congregation in order to better articulate our vision and mission and to take it effectively into the world."

As a result we adopted the guiding statement:

We welcome all, to grow bold faith and take bold action

We also affirmed that we need to increase our understanding of issues around race, ethnicity and socio-economic dynamics, and our skills of engagement and relationship building, in order to support our ministry. Meeting people in an informed, thoughtful, sensitive and curious manner are integral to excellent ministry.

In support, the Parish Committee developed a plan for the year that looks to promote the learning goal and help people discern their ministries of the moment. In the interest of "walking-the-walk," members of PC agreed to meet less often as a whole (Executive Committee still meets once a month), and work on personal discernment and other learning.

Because of my role at church, it was natural for me to adopt that learning goal as my own for this year, and although I've had a slow start, I'm finally on my way. I have done the following in order to support my learning:

Arranged my schedule so that Wednesday evenings are open for events and opportunities that support this learning, even if it's not at church

Joined a Small Group to support my spiritual development and discernment of my personal ministry

Drew up a learning plan, including reading, documentaries, conferences, workshops and symposia on race, economic justice and equality

Added study of facilitation, leadership and conflict transformation in support of ministry

Will begin studying Spanish with my daughter, Lily

This last item I am particularly eager to get started on, as it will create a shared experience for Lily and me. For the same reason, I make sure to play chess and ball games several times a week with Everett so that we have a chance to do things together that we both enjoy, and to make a real effort to have a set time for a small group-type experience with my husband, Harris. Finally, I also planned a set time to see friends in order to nurture relationships and make sure to have fun.

It sounds like a lot, and it is. I don't pretend that I will get to it all, or that I will do anything "perfectly." But just realigning my time, with this goal while still trying to attend to the other values in my life has made things much clearer and more fulfilling.

The Parish Committee would love to hear about what people are doing, insights you've had, something you've learned or yearn to do. Please, share it with us! We learn best from each other, and accomplish more together. You can e-mail me at melindaandharris@gmail.com, and label it FPM Learn & Act.

Yours in love and fellowship,

Melinda Collins, Parish Committee Chair